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Virginia's top elections official warns of possible delays in mail-in voting this year

Beals says U.S. Postal Service may not process all absentee ballots in time to be counted

BY: **MARKUS SCHMIDT** - SEPTEMBER 5, 2024 5:32 AM



A ballot drop box stands outside a government office building in Henrico County. (Graham Moomaw/Virginia Mercury)

Commissioner of Elections Susan Beals on Wednesday expressed concerns with the operational performance of the U.S. Postal Service ahead of the 2024 presidential election in Virginia, warning that mail-in ballots may not be processed in time to be counted.

"Election officials depend on the U.S. mail service to deliver ballots to voters and to return ballots to election officials," Beals told members of the Virginia House of Delegates Privileges and Elections Committee at a meeting in Richmond. "What I am hoping to change is the expectation of voters, that if I put my ballot in the

mail five days before election day that it is going to get there. You need to plan further out than that.”

Beals, who was appointed as Virginia’s commissioner of election by Gov. Glenn Youngkin in March 2022, responded to a question by Del. Phillip Scott, R-Fredericksburg, who had asked what she considered “the biggest threat” to the upcoming election.

Beals said since before the 2023 election cycle, the Department of Elections has seen issues with mail-in ballots cast by voters who had been living in the same house for decades.

“For example, the registrar tries to mail you a ballot and it gets mailed back to the registrar with one of those yellow stickers,” Beals said. “We had some cases where voters were trying to mail their ballot to an elections office and it’s being returned to the voter. We’ve had long delivery times and we’ve had examples of ballots that were sitting in the processing centers for days.”

The Postal Service has faced significant challenges in delivering mail-in ballots on time since the 2020 presidential election. The surge in mail-in voting due to the COVID-19 pandemic strained the postal system, leading to delays and concerns about the timely counting of votes.



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Last week during a [news conference](#), the Postal Service outlined its preparations for the “secure and successful delivery of election mail” in the Nov. 5 general election and briefed U.S. House and Senate committee staff of its preparedness to deliver the nation’s ballots.

“Our letter carriers and facilities teams across the country, the 640,000 women and men of the Postal Service, are fully focused on the critical mission of delivering the nation’s election mail – just as we have done so excellently through this current primary season and as we have done in the past,” Postmaster General Louis DeJoy said in a statement.

But despite these efforts to improve operations, issues such as staffing shortages, operational changes, and the sheer volume of ballots have continued to cause problems during more recent elections in many states – including in Virginia.

Beals told the committee on Wednesday that her department first started raising concerns with the Postal Service prior to the 2023

election.

“Virginia was a little bit of a canary (in a) coal mine on the issue of USPS and their performance because we had that statewide election in 2023, and a lot of other states did not, that’s their off-year,” she said.

Last year, the department started hearing from registrars about issues with mail ballots not being delivered to voters, not receiving them back in time, and ballots coming back as being undeliverable to voters who had not changed their address in years.

“We immediately reached out to USPS, we had an in-person meeting prior to the November election, and another in-person meeting after the election,” Beals said. But when the concerns remained, Beals requested to meet with members of Virginia’s congressional delegation and with representatives of both U.S. Sens. Mark Warner and Tim Kaine, D-Va., on Capitol Hill.

“They sent me immediately to their committees to detail the types of issues that we were seeing in Virginia,” Beals said, adding that she additionally flagged the mail delivery problems with the National Association of State Election Directors ([NASED](#)) and the U.S. Postal Regulatory Commission, an independent agency overseeing the operations of the Postal Service.



Virginia Elections Commissioner Susan Beals, pictured here in an undated photo, warned of possible delays in mail-in voting this year at a Virginia House of Delegates Privileges and Elections Committee meeting, Sept. 4, 2024. (Graham Moomaw/Virginia Mercury)

“It’s been frustrating for us because every time we’ve raised these issues we were assured that they were going to be addressed, and then the subsequent elections weren’t necessarily seeing them get addressed, we’re still seeing some of the same issues,” Beals told the committee.

A spokesman for the Postal Service in Virginia did not immediately respond to emails seeking comment Wednesday. But according to [data released](#) by the agency last week, nationally, the Postal Service in 2022 delivered 99.89% of ballots from voters to election officials within seven days. The 2022 midterm elections saw a similar level of on-time performance, with 99.93% of ballots delivered within the same timeframe.

And Del. Paul Krizek, D-Fairfax, a member of the committee, cautioned against drawing conclusions before more data on mail-in voting in Virginia is available.

“I think it’s important that we don’t scare the voters into thinking that this is not a safe and valid way to vote, because absentee balloting has been a hallmark of our democracy,” Krizek said in a brief interview Wednesday. “I think it’s a very important form of voting and I’d hate to see it go away or people be afraid to do it.”

Beals’ message to Virginians planning to vote by mail this year is to not wait until the last minute to request and mail back their ballot – and to stay on top of the process.

“Make sure that once you request your ballot and it’s been a week or two, go ahead and call your registrar’s office and ask where it is. And as soon as you receive it, turn it around and put it back in the mail, don’t let it sit,” Beals said.

“I know folks sometimes get their ballot and sometimes let it marinate and think about it, but you can’t do that this year. You need to make sure that you mail it back or you can drop it at a dropbox at your registrar’s office or at a polling location on Election Day.”



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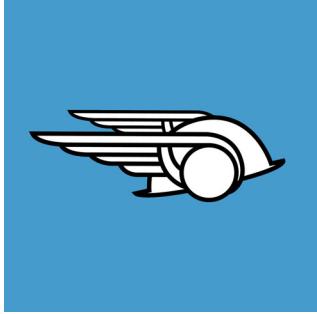
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